

The influence of the student voice in governance

In Wales we believe that it is essential the student voice feeds into the governing body and the committees and groups which inform the governing body and that its impact is recognised. However, there are challenges which come with this.

This leaflet illustrates contributions from universities and colleges providing higher education (HE), governing bodies and students' unions (SU) on the challenges faced with involving students in governance, the excellent practices adopted to meet these challenges, and their impact on the student experience which emphasises why students are involved in governance.

We want to share these practices in order to promote discussion with governors, institutions and students, and enable them to be embedded more widely. These practices will also be integrated into governor induction and training, to enable their greater penetration in Wales

What are the challenges associated with involving students in governance?

- **Balancing** the different roles and responsibilities of being a student representative and a student governor simultaneously.
- **Raising awareness** amongst members of the governing body of the vital role student governors play.
- **Time** - to be able to gain a broad view of institutional activity and attend meetings, training, undertaking research etc.
- **Time** - most student governors undertake the role for 1 or 2 years maximum which allows limited time to get to grips with the role.
- **Tension** between the relationship with the student constituency on the ground and involvement with the board of governors.
- **Support** - varies hugely from one SU to the next - dependent on funding and resources.

What is governance?

- The structures and processes which inform and allow for decisions to be made within institutions providing higher education.
- This is not restricted to the main decision making structure in the institution, the governing body, but also the committees and groups which inform the governing body.

Why should we involve students in governance?

- Students are key stakeholders / constituents.
- In Wales there is an increasing emphasis on students being partners in their education.
- Students are experts on the student experience.
- Students are directly impacted by decisions made by governing bodies.
- Students represent different demographic groups.
- Student membership of the governing body helps to increase accountability.
- Students can provide evidence based arguments.
- Students ask key questions in their critical friend role and are willing to challenge ideas.
- Students have the right to have confidence in how their university is run.
- Why wouldn't you involve students in governance?

Capturing the student voice

- **Structured student representative systems** allow students to raise student issues for the governing body, faculties and departments to consider. These representative systems are made up of sabbatical officers, course representatives, year representatives, postgraduate representatives (both taught and research), faculty representatives, project representatives and members of the diverse student population. This allows the student voice to contribute more systematically, and provides a more comprehensive view of the student experience.
- Institutions engage the diverse student population in developing **student strategies**, and other strategies or frameworks which impact on students, such as on learning and teaching. These strategies identify different levels at which students can be engaged, identify good practice and activities, and aim continually to enhance engagement.
- Institutions use a variety of ways of collecting **student feedback** in order to capture the voice of the diverse student body. Institutions tailor their own online surveys for different types of students and different subjects. They also participate in the National Student Survey (NSS) and Postgraduate Taught and Postgraduate Research surveys. They use written questionnaires and focus groups to follow up on survey information to generate further discussions
- and explore specific areas in greater depth. Standard module evaluation forms are used across institutions to create a consistent approach to module evaluation and are used for academic staff performance reviews.
- Sabbatical officers and representatives from the diverse student population sit on groups and committees and share their views on **academic frameworks, curriculum development and support services for students**. Committees and sub-committees focus on student specific issues such as learning and teaching, and the student experience. These committees are used to promote communication and feedback between the institution and the governing body with the student population. Student representatives make up a significant number of committees' members, in some student focused committees up to half are students which demonstrates the important contribution of the student voice.
- **Dedicated student councils and focus groups** strengthen the student voice through providing a visible line of communication for feedback on university issues, identifying good practices and enabling the student voice to contribute to decision making, eg in allocating resources.

- **Student-led teaching awards** have been implemented in institutions across Wales. Nominations for these awards come from the wider student population and are judged by SU officers, SU staff and senior institution officials with learning and teaching remits. These awards are presented at ceremonies which are attended by the nominees, students who made the nominations, course representatives and institution

Listening to the student voice

- Items relating to the student experience are regularly on the agenda of meetings across institutions, agendas are designed to give specific time periods where student issues are discussed and student representatives are given **standing items on the agenda** to raise issues of their choice.
- **All student representatives receive training** from institutions, the SU and external organisations such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) so they are confident and prepared to contribute to meetings effectively. Subsequently they are able to proactively set and influence policy and represent the diverse student body.
- Specific projects have been carried out to identify **best practice for student engagement**. Staff and students from the diverse student

staff. These awards engage the general student population with their learning and recognise and encourage the promotion of best teaching practice.

- Institutions use student expertise within specific departments to improve areas within the institution. Students with qualitative research analysis skills, for example, provide support for governing bodies to analyse an **institution's strategic plans**.

population research different practices in the HE sector, meet to discuss them and agree which practices should be promoted and how action plans should reflect this.

- **Dedicated members of staff, jointly managed by the institution and the SU**, develop the student representation system and enhance the relationship between the SU and the governing bodies. They assist the SU, student representatives and members of the general student population with submissions for quality reviews, delivering student voice projects and coordinating the NSS. An annual report gives an overview of student opinion and identifies where progress has been made across recurring themes. This allows for more effective identification of university-wide issues and ensure these issues are communicated to the SU and the governing body.

- Institutions recognise that **engaging students through technology** is more efficient when it uses platforms they regularly use, such as Twitter and Facebook. These are used as teaching tools, to discuss student issues, and publicise how the institutions and SU are responding to those issues. While using familiar social media can enable engagement with a wider and more diverse student audience, institutions and student representatives find that face to face contact can be just as effective.
- **Virtual 24/7 student representatives** are used to provide part-time, long distance and partner / international students an opportunity to submit enquiries through the SU website at any time of day. The enquiries are forwarded to the SU Vice President to ensure they receive prompt responses and allow for the voice of the wider student audience to be heard.
- A Professional Services Department (Academic Registry, Student Services, Governance Services etc) encourages students to contact them and provide **feedback on their experiences** when dealing with different departments across the institution.
- Staff from specific departments work with **staff-student committees** and provide support for societies and groups of students to develop facilities and events which will provide greater training opportunities for their members. This support shows that staff support from across institutions demonstrates a growing ethos to engage with student issues rather than limiting this to specific staff roles.
- Asking the **SU to identify investment for fundraising projects** or approve continuing projects can generate financial support for student focused activities. Students from the general student population are then recruited to assist with the fundraising, providing them with an opportunity to develop employability skills.
- Using **poster and email campaigns** followed by a range of interactive meetings allows staff and students to consider aims and ambitions which should shape institutional strategic plans.
- **PhD students are included in departmental meetings**, particularly where they represent a large part of the student body in a department. They have close working relationships with academic staff and are seen as future colleagues, and are therefore kept informed of, and given opportunities to contribute to, important decisions. This has helped shape departmental structures and procedures.
- Institutions include student representatives in discussions which impact on the diverse student body. This can be facilitated through **networks and focus groups for staff and students which centre directly**

on student issues. Within these larger groups small group discussions are used to create a more comfortable environment for students to express themselves.

The student voice on the governing body

- **Sabbatical officers sit on governing bodies** in institutions which provide higher education. They have access to all governing body meeting papers which ensures officers have a greater understanding of institutional strategies and have standing items on the agenda allowing them to present unvetted reports on student issues to each meeting. This allows them to contribute to the development of institutional policies and procedures.
- Sabbatical officers on governing bodies are included in all governing body development activities such as away days. They are also involved in **delivering governor training** which tests knowledge of student issues. In addition, they present their plans for their year in office to the governing body. As a result, governors develop closer working relationships with sabbatical officers and a greater awareness of student issues.
- Sabbatical officers take part in staff development programmes and also contribute to staff training through **providing feedback on the NSS findings**. Governors monitor these events and feed back to other members of the governing body. Groups have also been established to provide advice for students preparing to sit on governing body committees or senates.
- Governing bodies receive **annual student-focused evidence-based reports** on the student experience such as QAA Institutional Review submissions and SU analysis of NSS results. These reports inform the governing body on matters relating to student representation and engagement.
- Senior members of institutional governing bodies sit on a wide range of student boards such as **student councils and student forums**. These boards also include sabbatical officers, course representatives and students from the diverse student body, including postgraduate, part-time and international students.
- **SU representatives meet frequently (eg every term or quarter) with senior decision makers** in institutions specifically to discuss student issues.
- **Students are consulted on institutional procurement projects** ranging from student halls of residence, new campus facilities and opening a new

campus, as well as decisions on existing campus facilities such as cafés and libraries, therefore ensuring the student voice contributes to major developments.

- **Governors help train SU representatives.** The National Union of Students (NUS), the HEA and QAA also provide training for Course Representatives to enable them to understand the processes to assure quality in institutions and prepare them to engage with QAA Institutional Reviews. This provides student representatives with information on institutional approaches to quality issues and enables those representatives to contribute to quality assurance and enhancement in their department.
- **Students attend meetings and sit on committees which analyse the NSS.** Their input helps the governing body interpret the results from the student perspective. This has been helpful to target most effectively those areas of teaching and learning which would most benefit from further investment.

Closing the feedback loop

- Institutions have found training student representatives, providing staffing links and allowing students to choose their preferred form of communications has been the **most effective way to**

- **Institutions involve the SU in strategic decision-making**, eg developing institutional strategic plans, through methods such as consultation sessions and discussions. This approach provides assurance that institutions' plans have the support of the student body.
- **Where institutions are merging, the Students' Unions work together** to develop a new constitution for the new institution, while recognising the cultural differences of the student bodies.
- **Student charters** are in place between every university and its SU in Wales, and in further education institutions with directly funded HE provision. These set out the mutual expectations of the institutions and their students.
- **Relationship agreements** have been developed between all universities and their SU across Wales. This has ensured that a common set of principles helps the SU to ensure they are appropriately funded to carry out their key functions.

communicate with the diverse student body.

- Student representation on the governing body and committees **strengthens the student voice** through providing a visible line of communication for feedback on student issues and provides the

- representatives with the knowledge to provide feedback to the general student population.
- During staff-student meetings module conveners are encouraged to **share external examiners' reports, scheme reviews and action plans** in order to demonstrate how staff are responding to the feedback they are receiving.
 - **Information from the governing body is shared** through meetings with SUs and student forums, through podcasts from chairs of governors, emails and staff briefings.
 - **All survey results are shared with the student body.** The results of these surveys are discussed in committees with different student representatives and are promoted by the student representatives. This has increased the understanding of surveys
 - across the student body and increased completion rates.
 - **Committees promote what the institution is doing** with feedback they receive from students. This is achieved through posters, flyers and social media such as Facebook and Twitter.
 - **Institutions employ members of staff to provide students with frequent and high quality communications.** Students are sought for feedback to ensure that the framework for achieving this is effective.
 - **Members of the governing body attend student-led activities** such as sporting events, fundraisers and concerts and initiate events and awards to acknowledge and reward student extra-curricular activity.
 - The inclusion of student representatives in **strategic planning and major procurement decisions** demonstrates how their input has been used.

What next?

With these examples of excellent practice embedded in institutions providing HE in Wales we hope that the HE sector will be in a strong position to address future considerations such as:

- The impact of rising tuition fees and a 'students as consumers' view.
- Increasing demand for public information.
- The need for more structured and systematic feedback from students at course level.
- Are there any areas where students should not be involved?

The case studies and the list of contributing institutions can be found at: www.hefcw.ac.uk